

Farewell to a Great American.

by Peter Stone Brown

Pete Seeger was my first hero. I cannot remember a time when I did not know who he was. I first listened to him on my parent's 78s of the Almanac Singers singing "Talking Union" and "I Don't Want Your Millions Mister," and then on a Folkways record of work songs, singing "The Young Man Who Wouldn't Hoe Corn." I begged my dad for more, and my first LP on Folkways was *The Rainbow Quest* and then *American Ballads*. And of course there were Weavers albums. Eventually I got all of them.

I was a little too young to know about the blacklist. Somewhere around the time I was eight or nine, Seeger was supposed to play a concert at Temple University in Philadelphia. We arrived at the show to find out it was cancelled. Maybe a year later, I finally saw him at Town Hall in Philly. The great Texas blues singer Sam Lightnin' Hopkins was his special guest. In 1961, when I was nine, Seeger was convicted of Contempt of Congress for refusing to name names before the House Un-American Activities Committee six years before citing not the Fifth Amendment, but the First Amendment. He was sentenced to a year in prison. I wrote him a letter and he responded on photographic paper below pictures of his family in his cabin home in Beacon, New York, saying the case was under appeal. I still have that letter framed. I saw him again in concert not long after, and again in 1963.

At the concert in 1963, my life changed. It was only a few days after his famous concert at Carnegie Hall, released on Columbia, *We Shall Overcome*. Most of the songs at that concert weren't old folk songs, but new songs. Songs from the Civil Rights demonstrations in the South and songs from a new group of folksingers in Greenwich Village, including songs by Tom Paxton and Bob Dylan. The Bob Dylan songs he sang that Father's day afternoon were "Who Killed Davey Moore?" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall." I knew "Hard Rain" was like no other song I'd heard before. It was my introduction to Bob Dylan.

Over the next several years, I saw Seeger several more times, at Broadside Magazine Topical Song Hoots at the Village Gate, at innumerable anti-Vietnam rallies and demonstrations and in concert at Carnegie Hall. Seeger's whole thing in concert was getting the audience to sing, and I will never forget being way up in one of the high balconies at Carnegie while the entire audience sang, "We Shall Overcome." At the beginning of the documentary film on Seeger,

Power Of Song, Bob Dylan (decades after Newport) described it perfectly:

Pete Seeger, he had this amazing ability to look at a group of people and make them sing parts of the song. He'd make an orchestration out of this simple little song with everybody in the audience singing, whether you wanted to or not, you'd find yourself singing a part. It was beautiful.

Seeger came from a musical family. His father was a musicologist. He attended Harvard in the same class as John F. Kennedy, but dropped out to learn folk music. He bummed around the country with Woody Guthrie, playing union halls. He sang protest and topical songs early on. He played with Leadbelly. And he was a communist.

But he was also one of the great collectors of folk music. He recorded hundreds of old ballads for Folkways. The Leadbelly films easily findable on youtube today are because of him. He consistently put other musicians first, and always pointed to those who came before.

In 1948, with Lee Hays, a fellow Almanac Singer, he formed The Weavers with Fred Hellerman and Ronnie Gilbert. They soon got a gig singing at The Village Vanguard where they were a big hit. Bandleader Gordon Jenkins saw them there, and signed them to Decca Records. Jenkins orchestra backed them. In 1950, they had a huge hit with Leadbelly's "Goodnight Irene." They had other hits and were set to have their own TV show, but in 1953 it all ended when they were identified as Communists in the magazine *Red Channels*. Seeger started playing solo shows at colleges and anywhere else he could play and wrote instruction books on the banjo, the guitar and the 12-string guitar.

In 1955, The Weavers reunited at Carnegie Hall and the concert was recorded by a small classical label Vanguard Records. *The Weavers At Carnegie Hall* kicked off the folk movement that bloomed in the '60s. Every single folk group that came after is in their debt.

Though it is the last thing Seeger would want to be remembered for, he wrote or was involved in several hit records for other artists. With Lee Hays, he wrote "The Hammer Song," better known as "If I Had A Hammer." He wrote "Where Have All The Flowers Gone?" and "Turn Turn Turn." He brought "Wimoweh" later done by the Tokens as "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" to this country. And he had an influence on the sound of several bands. Roger (originally Jim) McGuinn of the Byrds started out as a side musician playing guitar and banjo for The Chad Mitchell Trio, Bobby Darin and Judy Collins among others. His

biggest influence on banjo and 12-string guitar was Pete Seeger. Mike Campbell, lead guitarist of Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers was directly influenced by Jim McGuinn. Peter Dinklage of REM was influenced by both McGuinn and Campbell. It is not a stretch to say that there were thousands of kids who picked up a banjo and a guitar because of Pete Seeger and learned from his instruction books.

Seeger wrote a regular column for *Sing Out!*, the folksong magazine called "Johnny Appleseed Junior," and that is how he saw himself musically, as the spreader of seeds. And some will argue his versions of songs were corruptions of the originals, but because of him a lot of people went back and found the old records and the original musicians and there is no doubt that is what Seeger wanted.

And there are some who will say The Weavers may have been the biggest corruptors of all. But The Weavers sang with a zest and a vibrancy that none of the groups who came after possessed. During the Woody Guthrie Centennial two years ago, I discovered a little known fact, that Guthrie himself rewrote his own songs so The Weavers could turn them into hits. He would sit on the floor of the studio while they were recording, rewriting his songs. He was into it!

The other Weavers referred to Seeger as "The Saint." He quit the group after they recorded a commercial for L&M cigarettes.

In 1960 John Hammond took a bold step and signed Pete Seeger to Columbia Records, where he recorded some of his best albums, most of them live in concert. One of the best is called *Strangers And Cousins* recorded during his world tour in 1963 and 1964. On that record is a version of Dylan's "Masters of War" recorded in Japan, while a translator translates the words to Japanese. It is one of the scariest renditions of that song.

Seeger was blacklisted from TV for most of the '60s. In 1963, ABC TV started the Hootenanny Television show filmed live on college campuses with fresh faced folksingers. Hootenanny was a word coined by Seeger and Guthrie, but he was not allowed on show. Many singers including Joan Baez and Bob Dylan refused to appear on the show because of that. In the mid-'60s, Seeger finally got a television show, *The Rainbow Quest* on educational television, and presented innumerable musicians from Elizabeth Cotten to Richard and Mimi Fariña to Judy Collins, Reverend Gary Davis, Mississippi John Hurt and Johnny Cash. Several of the episodes are on youtube. Finally in 1967, The Smothers Brothers invited him on their show. Seeger sang his original anti-Vietnam song, "Waist Deep In The Big Muddy," but CBS cut it from the show. The Smothers Brothers persisted and

finally in 1968, Seeger finally appeared on national TV singing that song. Johnny Cash followed suit a year or two later and had him on his ABC show, which was a hell of a bold move for a Nashville recording artist.

Seeger of course will be remembered for his activism as much as his music. He spoke out for peace, for civil rights, for justice and for environmentalism his entire life and never stopped. He risked his life going to the deep South early in the Civil Rights movement. In the '30s and '40s he sang for the unions. He sang for peace all over the world, and through his ship the sloop Clearwater, he is more responsible than anyone for cleaning up the Hudson River.

And in his own way, he could be pretty funny as his appearance not long ago on David Letterman's show demonstrated. When he sang "This Land Is Your Land" with Springsteen at Obama's inauguration in 2009, you could see the delight on his face as he sang the once banned verses of the song, especially the verse about the sign that said private property, but on the other side it didn't say nothing. In 1965 or '66 an article appeared in *Sing Out!* with the byline attributed to Seeger's wife Toshi, that was a review of all of Seeger's albums up to that point. It totally ripped into the records and his performing style, how he sang harmony to himself, tearing into his banjo and guitar style. Letters of protest followed in subsequent issues. Several months later, Seeger owned up to writing the article.

Unfortunately, Seeger is maligned in the online Bob Dylan community over Newport '65. But Dylan made it clear in the movie clip and in an interview in *Song Talk* magazine in 1991 where he told interviewer, Paul Zollo, "Pete Seeger, he's a great man," that he doesn't feel that way.

When Bruce Springsteen did his *Seeger Sessions* album and subsequent tour covering mostly the folk songs that Seeger recorded in the '50s on Folkways, however well intentioned (and the shows and band were great), he kind of missed the point or more accurately the feel. The shows were a fun romp, but not much more than that. My memory of Seeger concerts was leaving them inspired and full of a now destroyed word called hope. The only performer I've seen who makes you leave a concert feeling that way is Arlo Guthrie, who of course recorded a couple of live albums and did several tours with Seeger. Seeger had the ability to make you believe that a peaceful world was achievable.

I stopped going to Pete Seeger concerts a long time ago. I didn't need to anymore. But I still have all those records my dad bought me more

than half a century ago, and every now and then I'll pick one up in a used record store I didn't get back then. To me, his example as a man who stood up, lived live on his own terms and never stopped speaking out is equaled by very few. He started me on this crazy road of a life in music and that's something I'll never forget.

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